Kyiv mayor calls for temporary evacuation over heating outages

KYIV: The Ukraine capital's mayor has called upon residents to temporarily leave the city as sub-zero temperatures are expected to fall even lower.

A massive missile and drone attack on Kyiv killed four and ripped open apartment blocks on Friday.

The barrage came hours after Moscow rejected a plan by Kyiv and its Western allies to deploy peacekeeping forces to Ukraine should a ceasefire be reached.

Journalists in Kyiv saw residents running for shelter late on Thursday night as the air raid siren echoed, and heard Russian drones exploding into residential buildings and missiles whistling over the capital.

"Moscow is trying to use cold weather as a tool of terror," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said at a meeting in Kyiv with British Defence Secretary John Healy.

He said 20 residential buildings in Kyiv had been damaged, including the Qatari embassy, in one of the largest attacks on the capital for months.

Qatar expressed "deep regret" over the embassy hit and said that none of its staff there had been harmed.

'Very difficult' situation'

The Russian barrage left around half of all apartment blocks in the capital, some 6,000 buildings, without heating, Mayor Vitaliy Klitschko said.

Temperatures are set to fall to -15C on Saturday.

Officials said they were hopeful some heating could be restored on Friday night. "In some areas where the damage is more complex, additional time is needed," Ukraine's Restoration Minister Oleksiy Kuleba said.

Klitschko said the situation was "very difficult" and called on "residents of the capital who have the opportunity to temporarily leave the city for places with alternative sources of power and heat to do so."—AFP

Taiwan is a 'super-aged society', says study

TAIPEI: Taiwan has become a "super-aged society" for the first time, with 20 per cent of its shrinking population aged 65 or older, government data showed on Friday.

The island of more than 23 million people faces a looming demographic challenge, with its population falling overall as well as aging.

There were 4,673,155 people aged 65 or older in Taiwan last year, or 20.06 per cent of the population, according to the interior ministry.

That means it met the World Health Organisation's criteria for a super-aged society, with one in every five citizens aged 65 or more. The number of people aged 0-14 accounted for 11.51 per cent of the population, the ministry's data showed.

Only 9,027 newborns were recorded last month, a decrease of 27 per cent from a year earlier, with the total number of newborns last year hitting a record low of 107,812.

The crude birth rate, based on the number of childbirths per 1,000 people each year, came in at 4.56 last month.

Taiwan's population shrank for the first time in 2020, while its birth rate has been falling continuously for two decades.— AFP

RESIDENTS of Aleppo's Kurdish-majority Sheikh Maqsoud area evacuate their neighbourhood after warnings by the Syrian army calling on civilians to get out of harm's way.—AFP

Syria's Kurdish groups reject plea to quit Aleppo

A ceasefire announcement by Damascus asks Kurd fighters to withdraw to the country's north-east

ALEPPO: Kurdish groups in Aleppo vowed on Friday to defend their neighbourhoods from government forces, rejecting ceasefire terms declared by Damascus that demand Kurdish fighters withdraw from the Syrian city where clashes have raged this week.

The violence in Aleppo has exposed one of the main fault lines in Syria as the country tries to rebuild after a devastating war, with Kurdish forces resisting efforts by President Ahmed al Sharaa's government to bring their fighters under centralised authority.

Nine civilians have been killed and more than 140,000 have fled their homes in Aleppo, where Kurdish forces are trying to cling on to several neighbourhoods they have controlled since the early days of the anti-Assad uprising in 2011.

Neither the government nor the Kurdish forces have announced a toll of casualties among their fighters.

The ceasefire announced by the defence ministry overnight demanded the withdrawal of Kurdish forces to the Kurdish-held northeast. That would effectively end Kurdish control over the pockets of Aleppo that they have been holding.

But in a statement, Kurdish councils that run the Sheikh Maksoud and Ashrafiyah districts of Aleppo said calls to leave were "a call to surrender" and that Kurdish forces would instead "defend their neighbourhoods", accusing government forces of intensive shelling.

Us hoping for calm

The ceasefire announcement asked Kurdish forces to withdraw by 9am on Friday, but no one withdrew till late in the evening, according to Syrian security sources.

Tom Barrack, the US envoy for Syria, had earlier welcomed a "temporary ceasefire" and said Washington was working intensively to extend it beyond the 9am deadline. "We are hopeful this weekend will bring a more enduring calm and deeper dialogue," he wrote on *X*. Washington has been closely involved in efforts to promote integration between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has enjoyed US military support for more than a decade, and the Damascus government, with which the United States has developed close ties under President Donald Trump.

However, little has been achieved since the sides signed a framework agreement in March, which had called for the process to be completed by the end of last year.

A reporter in Aleppo saw more than a dozen empty buses entering Sheikh Maksoud on Friday morning.

Security sources said they were expected to carry Kurdish fighters towards eastern parts of Syria held by Kurdish forces. Syrian state TV later reported the buses had withdrawn without transporting anyone.

Neighbouring Turkiye views the SDF as a "terrorist organisation" linked to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party.—Reuters

Israeli strikes kill 13 in Gaza, threaten to unravel ceasefire

CAIRO: Israeli strikes killed 13 Palestinians in separate strikes in the Gaza Strip on Thursday, medics said while revising the earlier death toll from seven.

An Israeli airstrike killed four people and wounded three others, including children, in a tent in the western area of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip. Another strike killed a person east of the city, near where Israeli forces operate.

Later on Thursday, a man was killed in an Israeli strike on a school sheltering displaced families in Jabalia, northern Gaza, while another strike killed a person in a tent near Deir al Balah, in central Gaza Strip.

Four other people were killed in a separate strike in the Zeitoun neighbourhood of Gaza City.

The Israeli military said it struck several "rocket launch pits" after a rocket was launched from Gaza City toward Israel. The military said the rocket fell short and landed by a hospital in Gaza and accused Hamas of violating the ceasefire.

The ceasefire agreed in October has not progressed beyond the first phase, under which major fighting stopped, Israel withdrew from less than half of Gaza and Hamas released prisoners in return for Palestinian detainees and convicted prisoners.

Under future phases yet to be hammered out, US President Donald Trump's plan envisages Hamas disarming, Israel pulling out further and an internationally backed administration rebuilding Gaza.

No progress made

But little progress has been made on the next steps. More than 400 Palestinians and three Israeli soldiers have been killed since the ceasefire took effect, and nearly all of Gaza's more than two million people now live in makeshift homes or damaged buildings in a sliver of territory where Israeli troops have withdrawn and Hamas has reasserted control.—Reuters

Chinese FM postpones trip to Somalia

MOGADISHU: China's top diplomat Wang Yi postponed a visit to Somalia on Friday that was due to take place as part of his tour of east and southern Africa.

"The visit of the Chinese government delegation to Somalia today was delayed due to technical issues.

The Chinese government will issue a formal statement about this matter," an official at the presidential palace said.

Wang was in Ethiopia on Thursday to meet Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the head of the African Union, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf.

A joint statement by Wang and the African Union criticised the recent decision by Israel to recognise Somaliland, the breakaway region of Somalia.

Wang will also visit Tanzania and Lesotho.

All have seen relations with the West sour in recent months, with the administration of President Donald Trump lashing out at Somalis in the United States, Tanzania criticised over an election crackdown, and Lesotho hit by punishing tariffs.—AFP

Yemeni separatists announce disputed 'dissolution'

RIYADH: A delegation of Yemeni separatists allegedly held in Riyadh said on Friday they had to dissolve their movement after a failed land grab that infuriated Saudi Arabia, but the announcement was dismissed as made under duress by their colleagues based in the UAE.

Southern Transitional Council secretary general Abdulrahman al Subaihi, part of a high-level delegation that the STC alleges has been "arbitrarily detained" by Saudi authorities, read a prepared statement on Saudi TV.

The announcement escalates a rapidly evolving situation after the STC's offensive in southern Yemen was put down by Saudi Arabia.

"We announce the dissolution of the Southern Transitional Council," said the statement, which was also carried by the Saudi-sponsored Yemeni government's news agency.

It pledged their "commitment to working towards achieving our just southern goal through preparations for a comprehensive southern conference under the auspices of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia".

Saudi officials have not commented on the group's status. Other Yemeni officials shown in the TV footage, sitting behind long tables in a conference room, appeared sombre.

But STC officials outside Saudi Arabia signalled that the move had been made under duress.

STC vice president Hani bin Breik, who is based in the United Arab Emirates capital Abu Dhabi, slammed the announcement in a statement on *X* as a "political farce".

He said the decision was taken "under pressure and coercion by an STC team shackled by the restrictions of house arrest".

Saudi consolidation

STC spokesman Anwar al Tamimi, who is also in Abu Dhabi, dismissed the statement as "ridiculous" in a message, while another STC statement dismissed the dissolution and called for the delegation to be freed.

"Decisions concerning the Southern Transitional Council can only be made by the council in its entirety, under the chairmanship of the president," the statement said.

"This will take place immediately upon the release of the Southern Transitional Council delegation currently in Riyadh."

The announcement from Riyadh appears to be an attempt to consolidate Saudi control in south Yemen. The STC "was Abu Dhabi's largest political and military investment in Yemen", according to Mohammed al Basha of the US-based risk advisory Basha Report.

Subaihi is among a 50-plus delegation that has been incommunicado since arriving in Riyadh in the early hours of Wednesday, according to other STC officials.

The delegation was summoned to Riyadh after the STC seized swathes of south Yemen territory last month before being repelled by Saudi warplanes and pro-Saudi forces.

Zubaidi skips talks

The STC announcement echoes another incident in 2017 when Lebanon's prime minister Saad Hariri resigned in a televised address from Riyadh, where he was speculated to be under house arrest.

After French intervention, Hariri returned to Lebanon and rescinded his resignation.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

ROME: Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni attends her end-of-year press conference.—Reuter

BEIJING: Visitors look at a robot on display at a robotics company's retail store.—AFP

Russia joins China, Iran for naval drills off South Africa

CAPE TOWN: A Russian warship arrived off South Africa's main naval base on Friday to join Chinese and Iranian vessels for military exercises that risk further damaging Pretoria's relations with Washington.

The exercises draw together several nations feuding with the US administration and come at a time of heightened tensions following Washington's raid on Venezuela.

A Chinese destroyer and replenishment ship, as well as an Iranian forward base vessel, sailed into South African waters earlier this week ahead of the week-long manoeuvres due to kick off at the weekend.

Journalists near the Simon's Town base saw the Russian-flagged corvette vessel pull into a bay.

The China-led "Will for Peace" drill involves navies from the 11-nation BRICS group of emerging nations, which President Donald Trump has labelled "anti-American".

The United Arab Emirates was also expected to send ships, South Africa's Deputy Defence Minister Bantu Holomisa told a television channel.

Fellow BRICS nations Indonesia, Ethiopia and Brazil will send observers, he added. The remaining members of the grouping are India, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The exercise will allow the navies "to exchange best practices and improve joint operational capabilities, which contributes to the safety of shipping routes and overall regional maritime stability", South Africa's defence force said.

Global tensions

Asked about the timing of the drill, Holomisa said: "This exercise was planned long before these tensions we are witnessing today."

They were initially scheduled for November, but postponed because they clashed with the G20 summit in Johannesburg.

At odds with South Africa over a range of international issues, the United States boycotted the summit.

It also expelled the South African ambassador last year and imposed 30 per cent trade tariffs.—AFP

A RUSSIAN vessel arrives at a naval base in Cape Town for joint exercises in South Africa.—Reuters

MANIZALES: Spanish novillera (young matador) Olga Casado performs during a bullfighting fair in Colombia.—AFP

BAYONNE: French farmers block a motorway with tractors during a demonstration against the proposed EU-Mercosur trade deal. A majority of European states approved the free trade agreement with Mercosur on Friday, despite the anger of farmers and the opposition.—AFP